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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the core values of the Dinka tribe of Sudan, focusing on the most prominent aspects of their family life. The paper also examines how the Dinka family is changing in the face of Sudan's civil war and modernization. It concludes with suggestions for new directions that social work can take to facilitate the transition of the Dinka refugees into unfamiliar cultures outside of Sudan. (KFT) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education)

The Dinka of Sudan: Family Traditions in Transition

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The traditional tribal culture and family structure of Sudan's Dinka have historically allowed for strong extended families and clear expectations of gender and age roles. [1]However, many of their traditions are currently being challenged as war, modernization and increased contact with foreign cultures disrupt the Dinka ways of life. Exposure to violence beyond their tribe and entrance into the rest of the world as refugees are dismantling the life patterns that have been so familiar to them This paper will first examine core traditional values of the Dinka, followed by a description of prominent aspects of their family life.[2] It will then examine how the Dinka family is changing in the face of Sudan's civil war and modernization and conclude with suggestions for new directions social work can take to facilitate the transition of the Dinka into unfamiliar cultures outside of Sudan.

Values and Beliefs of the Dinka

Core values. Traditionally, the Dinka have been a positive, proud, ethnocentric people, who felt there could be no good reason to leave their country and lifestyle. Key values have been harmony, unity, dignity, integrity and persuasion. These are not always achieved in manners that other cultures would understand. For example, Dinka youth are known for their violent dispositions; they are encouraged by elders to end disputes quickly with "controlled violence" (p. 52) because, as the values of harmony and unity suggest to their elders, it is believed best not to leave disputes unresolved for long. Children and adolescents are thought too immature to be effective with the

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[1]Unless otherwise cited, references to Dinka life are drawn from the 1984 edition of The Dinka of the Sudan by Brookings Institution scholar and Dinka Francis Deng. This work is the only in-depth case study of Dinka life stages, traditions and family dynamics.

[2]The traditions and family are described in the present tense, although Dinka practices have already undergone significant change in the last half century.

mode of persuasion that adults have traditionally preferred to end their disputes.

Paternal lineage. Contribution to the perfection of paternal lineage has been the determinant of success in life for the Dinka. It assures one's continued influence and identity after death. Children are encouraged to learn to recite their paternal lineage almost as soon as they can talk (this memorization is also seen as an early intelligence test); their goal as they grow is to respect and enhance the lineage with their actions. The Dinka feel that ancestors can and do place curses on the living when the living shame the dead. These curses explain all varieties of illness and misfortune in life. The culture has been historically polygynistic, and the greatest curse in Dinka life occurs when women display jealousy for one another.

Age sets .The Dinka have a formal social structure called age sets. For each gender there are groups of people of roughly the same age who are initiated into adulthood at the same time and continue as a social unit throughout life. Younger age sets must respect older ones. Older age sets sometimes feel a threat to their status from younger ones. Both boys and girls must respect those already initiated into age sets; they must do anything an adult requires of them or be beaten.

The cow. The cow is an especially crucial part of Dinka culture and identity. Cattle have symbolic importance in all stages of life. Upon initiation into manhood, Dinka males have historically been given a "personality ox,"chosen for its colors and their connection to the man's status in the family (status has been determined by where his mother falls in the order of his father's marriages and his birth seniority). The man is henceforth called by a nickname relating to the ox's colors. He decorates and displays his personality ox for recognition, and makes songs about it. Cattle also play a vital role in marriage. The groom's extended family must negotiate a dowry of cattle before a daughter can be married, and her family must give a smaller share of their own cattle

to the groom's family as well. The public watches and comments on these cattle negotiations. More than just material wealth, the cattle are the symbol of human relationships.

Family Life

The role of wife and mother. The primary role of the Dinka wife is to have children, thereby extending her husband's lineage. If for some reason she is unable to become pregnant by her husband, or if her husband dies before they have a child, a male relative of the husband may be substituted for him to impregnate the wife and carry on the husband's line. Once a child is born, the woman is not allowed to have intercourse with her husband until her child is weaned three to four years later. While she is nursing, the husband looks to another wife for sexual relations. If a woman is a senior wife (the first to marry the husband) she is called "mother" by the junior wives. She is therefore expected to suppress any feelings of rivalry she has for them, and she must stop producing children earlier than the junior wives. She must also stop having children when one of her own children marries, because the marriage denotes her time to change to the role of grandmother.

When a child is born, the mother lives in a separate compartment from the father, who finds the woman who has recently given birth esthetically unpleasant. As is common in other cultures, the mother is the first primary care giver, but Deng stresses that many other kin also take care of the baby. She also has a "baby-keeper," a young girl who assists her with infant care and her work (cooking, working in the fields, maintaining the fire). The baby-keeper is like a servant but is not paid; her work is part of the "mutual solidarity of kinship" (p.43).

The Dinka mother must be careful in the attention she shows her child. While it is a positive thing to say a child looks just like his father, it is negative to say the child looks like his mother. If

her child is quarreling with its half-kin, the child of a co-wife, the mother must not support her child lest it appear to be favoritism. Similarly, if a co-wife beats her child in punishment, the mother cannot defend her child. A child must also refrain from expressing his feelings toward his mother. Deng reports:

> Countless relatives question a child as to which of his parents he loves, not which of them he loves the most. Rarely is a Dinka child innocent enough to say "Mother." To say so is to expose oneself to ridicule and shame. Even the mother is bound to be embarrassed. In her own interest, she must see to it that this does not happen (p.51).

Male upbringing and initiation[3]. When a young boy is weaned at age 3 or 4, he leaves his mother and goes to live with his maternal grandparents. While the child feels loss at being removed from his parents' home, Deng feels that the new home is more affectionate and secure because of the competition for the father's attention form wives and other children in the parental home. In the new home the child receives affection from all female elder relatives, and is protected from other children, especially by the maternal uncle; the child also receives "privileged companionship and the wise guidance of senior men" (p.48). The young child visits his father's home, briefly and as a guest, but his maternal kin are sure to remind him of the importance of loyalty to his paternal lineage. In general in the child's life, the mother's side of the family "enjoys natural love and affection while the father's side enjoys prescribed loyalty and devotion" (p.49).

The child returns to the parental home at the "age of cognition" (p.51), presumably around

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[3] Little detailed information on the young life of female children is available in Deng's case study, so information here is limited to male children. Deng does report that the female child's primary mission is to prepare for marriage so that she can bring her family cattle wealth, enabling her brothers to marry later and extend their lineage.

5 or 6 years old, and his education begins. Education for the Dinka means sex role differentiation and understanding of key Dinka values. Boys learn from each other and sometimes older males among the cattle herds, while girls learn from women in or near the huts. Boys practice herding and milking; while they care mostly for their mother's cattle, they must be careful not to overlook their stepmother's cattle. Education also comes in the form of traditional games, story-telling and songs that teach of Dinka values and life events. Deng provides examples of these traditions relating to realizing mortality, curtailing wives' jealousy, the rewards of virtue and the punishment of evil (p.59-65).

A boy's progress in developing courage is put to the test between 16 and 18 years of age by the initiation ritual that he undergoes to enter into adulthood. He must now temper the aggression of his youth and replace it with dignity and self-restraint. Deng reports, "Seeing a Dinka before and after initiation is enough to convince one of the extraordinary results that can be achieved overnight by the ritualized and socialized drama of psychological conditioning" (p.68). Before initiation, males cannot flirt, dance or date girls. Also, they must do the bidding of all elders. Deng quotes a song of the uninitiated:

I hate being a boy.

I will no longer remain a boy;

Even if initiation burns like gas

It is better that I die.(p.69)

A boy is put in an age-set at puberty. One boy of strong lineage is designated as the father of the group and chooses their name. The age set requests permission of the tribe one year in advance for initiation. In that year they may not eat dairy products or drink milk. When initiation

day nears, there is much feasting and dancing in the tribe, especially the day before. People dance through the night up to the initiation. The initiation itself is a scarification ceremony. Each male has seven to ten deep cuts made into his forehead. Holes are dug in the ground to catch his blood. At first initiates try to chant gleefully like the observers, but soon they pass out.

For several months after the operation, the initiates live collectively in restricted villages and heal. They are well-fed, do not work, sing special songs of self-praise and perform dances in special bells and anklets during this time. After the recovery period the newly-initiated finally receive spears (the youth were thought to be too unruly to carry spears before initiation). They then go to the wilderness and learn fighting skills from the next older age-set. They are on their way into manhood and are ready to find wives and extend their lineage.

Aging. As the Dinka reach an age where their children are having families, the sons begin to take over the authority that the father has held, but the elderly, especially males, are respected for their wisdom, and the fact that they (rather than their wives) are credited with their children's births. They are consulted for matters of litigation; it is generally accepted that they must be consulted and heard because of their aged wisdom, though they are sometimes not obeyed. Their proximity to the ancestors in approaching death also earns them respect. This proximity gives them increased power to curse the living. Power to curse their kin aside, parents are generally well-cared for as a Dinka family value.

Deng reports that aged men rely more on their children for emotional support than material, as they have been the holder of power and wealth in the family, but aged women depend on children for both material and emotional help. As the woman ages, the husband is able to marry younger wives, and the older wife loses some of her husband's support. As she was the parent who provided

them with some emotional support (even though it was not always overt), the children feel responsibility to take care of her. She also cares for their children. In some compound families, assisting the mother is harder for the children to do because of the threat of jealousy from co-wives.

Death. Deng states that the Dinka, in spite of their values of sharing and unity, consider death to be "spiritually polluted" (p.131). Those who have lost someone are considered impure and dangerous. They cannot socialize with others in their period of mourning (about one year), nor can they drink or eat in other's homes. It is feared that contact would invite disease or other misfortune on those who are not mourning. Interestingly, it is said that in the past Dinka chiefs would be buried alive when they were believed to be on the verge of death, possibly so that their people wouldn't see them in the undignified state of dying.

Changes Affecting the Dinka Traditions

In the twentieth century many external influences acted upon the Dinka traditions and beliefs. Their animist spiritual beliefs were challenged and for many replaced as the tribe came in contact with Christian missionaries. The missionaries began to teach literacy to male Dinka, and sons of chiefs started to go to cities to be educated. Also, some Dinka looked for work in cities and converted to Islam, Sudan's predominant religion. Contact with both Christians and Muslims exposed the Dinka to modern ways of life.

Since 1956, the Dinka have been involved in Sudan's civil war, with a break in the 1970's and 1980's. Being the largest ethnic group in the rebelling South, the Dinka have experienced torture, slave raids, death and loss. In addition to the toll these extreme traumas have taken on Dinka families, the cow that has been crucial to their identity has been killed or taken away in raids. Deng reported to the Washington Post (Buckley, S.; August 24, 1997; p. A1) that an old myth about

how the Dinka came to love cattle has been altered to say that their excessive love for cattle angered God, and now they are being punished. Deng points out that the previously positive, ethnocentric Dinka are "see[ing] themselves in a negative light for the first time."

The Dinka Outside of Sudan

Issues of immigration. Many Dinka have been resettled as refugees in other countries and many more remain in camps awaiting resettlement. How is this affecting the Dinka family? Hernandez and McGoldrick (1999) posit that "immigration creates such long-ranging and profound family changes that it creates an entire new life stage for all families that go through it." In the case of the Dinka, families must learn to cope with the loss of the practice of polygamy, which entails a new approach to married life, gender roles, and child care. In many cases husbands and fathers have been killed in the fighting, so women are now single heads of households. The families will be smaller, with fewer people and less time to provide one another with expected support.

As immigrants, Dinka families will more than likely find themselves at the bottom rung of the economy in the new country (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999); even though they were not monetarily wealthy in Sudan, they had status among their own people. In the new country women (mothers and grandmothers) might have to work, and men might be restricted in the kinds of control they can exert over wives and children. Grandparents may be young enough to work in the new country; grandmothers would not be able to fulfill their expected role of full-time care giver to the grandchildren, and grandfathers would not be as able to serve as readily as advisor to younger men. Also, as the Dinka have a strikingly different physical appearance (very tall and thin with very dark skin), they may encounter racial discrimination (which they experienced in Sudan as well, but most lived exclusively among Dinka) in the workplace and elsewhere.

Children and adolescents will probably adapt to the new culture faster than their parents and form a new identity around it. Also, children will often need to serve as interpreters for their elders, a dependency which may make elders uncomfortable. Formal education and literacy will probably be expected of Dinka children, which adds another new and possibly strained dimension to their relationship with their uneducated, illiterate mothers. Enforcing discipline may be difficult for the widowed mother, who would have left it up to the father in Sudan. Tousignant et al (1999) report that it is common for single mothers from traditional households to "have more difficulty in asserting authority on male adolescents," especially when sons socialize in school and with their peers.

Special concerns of refugees. As refugees from a terrible civil war, Dinka families face difficulties far beyond the scope of non-refugee immigrants. As Howard and Hode (2000) report:

> Many features of the refugee experience are potential sources of stress (Lin, 1986). Probably the most important are physical and psychological sequelae of traumatic experience in the country of origin. Particularly important are witnessing and experiencing torture or war and experiencing the loss or death of relatives. Fear of further violence and oppression leads many people to seek a safe haven...Child refugees may suffer the loss of parents if they have been killed or detained abroad. Furthermore, parenting may be impaired by the distress and emotional unavailability of the parents. These difficulties may lead to a deterioration in family relationships, and even parenting breakdown and child abuse.

Refugees in fact "show high levels of distress and psychiatric disorder attributable to adverse experiences." The most frequent are depression, posttraumatic stress disorder and anxiety (Howard & Hodes, 2000).

What can social workers do to help Dinka families who come to settle in the United States? Certainly familiarizing oneself with the traditional culture is crucial. Research can be done to find out what aspects of Dinka family life and spirituality can be drawn upon to support the traumatized Dinka. In view of the Dinka's perception that death from natural causes is spiritually polluted, how has witnessing so much death affected them differently than it would affect another culture? Information could be gathered from previously resettled Dinka as well as workers who have observed the refugees in Kenyan refugee camps. Spiritual investigation would need to keep in sight the fact that many of the Dinka are of the animist tradition, while some are Christian with animist influences, and others are more westernized Christian. Investigation of previous Dinka refugees' experiences to find out what adjustments have been made to family life and structure would also be helpful to predict and possibly reduce crises in new refugee families. If a social worker can have any influence in this arena, it would be helpful to see that Dinka family members are settled in close proximity to each other so that they can continue to draw on the strength of extended kin as they have historically.

Culturally appropriate counseling in Dinka could be made available to help families and individuals cope with trauma and changing roles for ages and genders in the new country. Attention to physical health problems might need to be monitored by a social worker. The Dinka have historically believed that ailments are the result of curses; they are distrustful of western medicine. Gradually introducing support from community and/or church-based programs could help the refugees learn English; increase life skills, socialization and trust in the new culture; and develop an extended sense of community.

The Lost Boys. When speaking of Dinka refugees, special attention must be given to the

Lost Boys of Sudan (Astill, J., The Guardian, 2000). Seventeen thousand boys from very young to adolescent ages originally banded together in the late 1980's or early 1990's to flee forced military service and find a refugee camp. In 1992 they reached Kenya and have been in camps ever since. They have missed out on Dinka initiation rituals and have become alienated from Dinka culture. Not knowing if their parents are alive, they have been each others' family and support.

Now the Lost Boys are being divided up to be resettled in various countries. Three thousand eight hundred are expected to have settled in the United States by the near future. The few adults who accompanied them and acted as guardians are to remain in Kenya (Astill, J., The Guardian, 2000).

Many questions lie ahead for the Lost Boys. Social workers involved in their resettlement will need to know about factors of resilience in the context of Dinka culture. What has helped these children so far to survive attack by man and nature and separation from their families? Rey, as cited in Palmer (2000), posits that a child who had a long history of family affection prior to separation from his parents suffers the loss considerably in the short term but "possesses values and habits that in the long run will facilitate his adjustment, especially if his upbringing has taught him to rely on himself." Certainly the traditional Dinka family provides affection to young children from many relatives, and Dinka boys are sent out together to work in cattle camps without supervision from a young age. The children that survived the journey to the camps have proven self-reliance, which may speak positively for their future adjustment and overcoming trauma..

As it is unknown if the Lost Boys' parents are still alive, the children coming to the U.S. are being placed in foster care. How will these particular children actually adjust to living in a family situation again, in a new, modern culture, with so much independence and trauma in their past?

While the above information about resilience is helpful, the Lost Boys have the added consideration of extended time on their own. Social workers could explore the ramifications of this extreme independence on resilience issues and fitting into a foster care situation. Also, Lost Boys who have passed the age of 18 are now being considered adults in the U.S., which means they will be expected to work to receive continued refugee benefits, and they will not receive all the attention and education that younger boys will. They probably had more responsibilities among their group for teaching and protecting the younger children, and they may need special, sensitive attention to overcome their experiences.

Conclusion

The Dinka people have had an unusual family structure and culture by western standards. Some of their traditions like extended kinship support and early independence for male children have undoubtedly helped them to weather difficulties of persecution in their native country and in refugee resettlement. Others such as polygyny and incorporation of cattle into everyday life and rituals cannot be carried over into new cultures. Much more remains to be seen of how their values, roles and traditions will assist them in the aftermath of trauma, or will change with their refugee experiences. Culturally sensitive social workers can play an important role in this transition.

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